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### Letter, 1992 December 16, from Gene DeGruson to Mary Fuller

Gene DeGruson

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16 December 1992

Dr. Mary Fuller  
1001 North McKnight, Apt. 2-E  
St. Louis, MO 63132

Dear Mary:

Excuse my silence: I've been besieged with researchers and journalists all semester long. The end is in sight, however (today's the last day of finals) and I'll be getting the poems off to you. (I still have to write Ora to tell her which ones in her collection we don't have and send her those she was unaware of.)

The letter's beautiful. I started to put in proofreading marks, but decided it would be easier to retype it--with the inevitable editorial reworkings that happen when I retype something. I enclose a couple of copies.

More soon, I trust. I do intend getting out Christmas cards, but in case I'm late, do have a Merry Christmas and a fantastic 1993.

Yours,

Gene DeGruson



[Attachment to Correspondence  
from Debnison, Gene dated  
16 December 1992]

Dear :

I am excited to invite you to become a member of a national committee created to commemorate the 100th birthday of Dr. Eva Jessye (1895-1992). Those of you who knew her understand fully the tremendous contribution she made to Afro-American music and culture. You also understand how her musical brilliance and presence deeply affected a wide range of musicians, writers, singers, choral directors, and others in pursuit of creativity, equality, and social justice. Among the many honors she received during her illustrious and productive career, Dr. Jessye was inducted into the Song Writers Hall of Fame and saluted by former Mayor Andrew Young of Atlanta as "A Most Distinguished Citizen of the World."

The roots of Dr. Jessye's life and work lie in the Negro spiritual. She would often tell those closest to her that the spiritual, with its message of suffering, hope, joy, and sorrow, spoke to the deepest aspirations of all races, colors, and nationalities. Given this belief, it is not surprising that Dr. Jessye was appointed choral director of Porgy and Bess by its composer, George Gershwin, in 1935 or that the Eva Jessye Choir appeared countless times on the stage of the Capitol Theater on Broadway and the Major Bowes Family Radio Hour. Fittingly, one of the last programs that she wrote, produced, and directed at the University of Michigan in 1978 (at the age of 83) was "Songs for the Soul: The Negro Spiritual."

In Dr. Jessye's honor, we are planning a 100-year commemorative celebration in Pittsburg, Kansas, in the fall of 1995. The center-



piece of this event will be the production of a television special recreating the 1978 performance of "Songs for the Soul: The Negro Spiritual." We hope to interest network television by securing the support of leading black actresses, actors, writers, musicians, and singers to honor a woman whose courageous path helped make possible the road they travel today. We also intend to seek funding from the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities for the production of a feature documentary film on Eva Jessye's life and music, the publication of an illustrated book of Dr. Jessye's 65 years of poetry, and a biography of Dr. Jessye. These materials will be distributed to schools, churches, youth groups, cultural associations, and other organizations to inspire others through Dr. Jessye's example.

Dr. Jessye's personal collection is housed at Pittsburg State University in her native state, and Gene DeGruson, the curator of that collection, has pledged his support to help make this event truly memorable. Dr. Willis Patterson, Dean of the School of Music and Director of the Eva Jessye Collection at the University of Michigan, has also pledged his cooperation for our efforts.

During her lifetime, Dr. Jessye was extremely generous. At the time of her death, in spite of her financial circumstances, she wanted a fund established in her name so that money made on royalties from her music or written works could help aspiring young talent to continue working on their own dreams. I have created the Eva Jessye



Award Fund for precisely this reason. Currently the Award Fund is housed at LifeSpan Resources, a 501(C)3 corporation, under the direction of Carl Tice in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Carol was one of Dr. Jessye's closest friends for the last twenty years of her life. We are currently investigating how we might set up an independent 501(C)3 corporation here in St. Louis to administer the Award Fund. We hope the 100th birthday celebration will raise sufficient moneys to realize one of Dr. Jessye's most important concerns--assisting young talent of all races, colors, creeds, and nationalities.

Those of us working on the 1995 celebration need your help. We are attempting to raise an initial \$50,000 over the next six months to hire a grant writer, develop a complete proposal, cover administrative costs, contact and secure support from the black entertainment community, and interest the networks in "Songs for the Soul." I would like you to be a founding member of "Songs for the Soul" National Committee. Your personal commitment and generous contribution would help us establish the credibility we need and generate the funds necessary to begin our work. You will receive updates twice a year reporting the progress of the celebration and our other projects. Hopefully you will offer us other names and suggestions on how we can make contacts or secure funding.

We are moving into a new era of change, understanding, and community. The black spiritual transcends national and racial differences, proclaiming a love for fellow human beings, sorrow for their



suffering, and the strength offered by hope. These are all qualities this country needs as we move toward a new century. Dr. Jessye was ahead of her time. Let us build on her nearly 100 years of experience to encourage a new and better world for ourselves and generations yet to come.

Sincerely,

Mary Fuller

Niece of Dr. Jessye